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323-63

OCI No. 3286/63

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
8 November 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Population Control in Japan

1. Japan's low rate of population growth, currently less than one per cent annually, results from public attitudes and the operation of government policy since shortly after World War II.
2. Japan has probably the highest ratio of population to area suitable for cultivation of any nation in the world. In the immediate postwar years, it found this ancient problem becoming critical. Its overseas empire was lost, there was an even greater scarcity than previously of areas open for emigration, and a baby boom was underway. In 1948 a Eugenics Protection Law was passed under which pregnancies could be interrupted for economic as well as health reasons. Later modifications permit sterilization on individual request. Contraception was given official approval and widespread publicity, public clinics have been established, and advice on family planning is freely available. Pilot projects conducted in villages have spread birth control techniques throughout the country. The Japanese people, unlike those in many countries experiencing population pressures, were receptive to this program. In earlier history Japanese peasants frequently resorted to abortion and infanticide in times of duress. The breakdown of the old rural, paternalistic system with its Confucian emphasis on producing male offspring as potential workers and loyal servants of the Emperor has affected popular attitudes, as have the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Japanese society. The greater freedom women are experiencing in the postwar period is also a relevant factor. In short,

the Japanese people appear to have become convinced that the national interests and their personal interests in this matter largely coincide. The high literacy rate has facilitated the spread of birth control information.

4. The public has employed most methods of fertility control, including abortion, terminating pregnancies in large numbers. At least one million induced abortions are estimated to take place annually under the 1948 law. Violations of the liberally interpreted legislation are dealt with leniently, and there may be as many as another million abortions unreported. The total number of abortions may outnumber live births.

5. There is some indication that the trend may be leveling off. The government has become worried about abuses of the law and is considering removing some financial justifications for abortion. Women's groups, which remain in the forefront of birth control campaigns, have similarly become concerned that more than half the officially reported abortions are performed for younger women terminating first pregnancies and hence scarcely within the spirit of the law. Prosperity has recently brought an increase in the marriage rate, and the birth rate may again be rising slightly. Still, at about 17 live births annually per thousand population, the figure is less than half what it was 15 years ago.